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Zoölogist, The, (4) Nos. 10-12, 1897.

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## CORRESPONDENCE.

### Habits of the Maryland Yellow-throat.

EDITORS OF 'THE AUK':—

*Dear Sirs:*—If the correspondence pages of 'The Auk' are open to minor matters of this kind, I should like to ask if the note on 'Peculiar Nesting of the Maryland Yellow-throat' by Mr. Walton I. Whitehill<sup>1</sup> in the October issue of 1897 makes a correct statement in regard to the Maryland Yellow-throats of Minnesota when it says "the nests are usually to be found in dense woods far from water." This is certainly diametrically opposite to the habits of this bird in the eastern part of its range, for here in New England I am sure that all observers will bear me out in saying that *Geothlypis trichas* is very rarely and perhaps *never* found breeding at any distance from water.

Yours very truly,

FRANCIS H. ALLEN.

*West Roxbury, Mass.*

### The Fauna of Muskeget Island — A Protest.

EDITORS OF 'THE AUK':—

*Dear Sirs:*—In a recent paper on the Terns of Muskeget Island,<sup>2</sup> Mr. George H. Mackay records the extermination of a family of Short-eared Owls that had established themselves on the island during the summer

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<sup>1</sup>[For WHITEHILL read MITCHELL, Whitehill having been printed through error. — EDD.]

<sup>2</sup> Auk, XIV, pp. 380-390. October, 1897.

of 1896. "I devoted much time in trying to shoot them" he says (on page 388); and in a footnote: "All but one were shot before the close of the season."

All friends of bird protection must recognize with gratitude the work done by Mr. Mackay and his associates in protecting the colonies of Terns and Laughing Gulls on Muskeget—work which can scarcely be appreciated by one who has not seen the teeming life which in summer now covers the barren sand hills of the island. But when bird protection results in the destruction of a family of Owls, which, notwithstanding its numerical insignificance, far outweighs in biological interest the largest Tern colony on the entire Atlantic coast, it is necessary to enter a protest.

The vertebrate fauna of Muskeget may be roughly divided into two groups: 1st, animals which there find conditions essentially normal and similar to those to which they are subjected throughout their range; and 2nd, animals which there find essentially abnormal conditions, that is, conditions which distinctly differ from those to which they are elsewhere exposed.<sup>1</sup> To the first class belong most of the breeding birds, among which may be mentioned: *Sterna hirundo*, *S. dougalli*, *S. paradisæa*, *Larus atricilla*, *Ægialitis meloda*, *Actitis macularia*, *Agelaius phœniceus*, *Sturnella magna*, *Ammodramus caudacutus*, *A. sandwichensis savanna*, and *Melospiza fasciata*.<sup>2</sup> The coast form of the common toad probably belongs also in this category. In the second class we find the two mammals of the island, a Vole and White-footed Mouse, and only one bird, the Short-eared Owl. It is to the members of the second class that the chief interest attaches, because they are rapidly undergoing modification to fit them to the needs of their peculiar environment, while no such process is taking place among the inhabitants of the island that find there their normal surroundings. The process of change has progressed furthest with the Vole, *Microtus breweri* (Baird), which is now so much differentiated as to be readily separable from the wide-ranging *Microtus pennsylvanicus* of Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard and the adjacent mainland. The White-footed Mouse, *Peromyscus leucopus* (Rafinesque), is beginning to undergo a series of changes which if not interrupted will doubtless eventually result in the formation of a new species.<sup>3</sup> A similar process would doubtless take place in the Owls if they were strictly protected and allowed to become firmly established on the island, for the bare glaring sand and scant vegetation among which

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<sup>1</sup> A similar classification could probably be made with the plants, but here the preponderance of the first class would be even greater than in the case of the land Vertebrates.

<sup>2</sup> This list is taken from a summary of the Muskeget fauna published in 1896. Miller, Proc. Bost. Soc. Nat. Hist., XXVII, pp. 79-83.

<sup>3</sup> See Miller, Proc. Bost. Soc. Nat. Hist., XXVII, p. 80.

they are there forced to live, places them in a very different environment from that of the rest of their kind. The importance of a careful historical record of a case like this can scarcely be estimated; and are ornithologists and intelligent bird protectors to be reckoned as one with market hunters and idle gunners in destroying the opportunities for obtaining such data?

That the Muskeget environment is sufficiently potent to produce a recognizable local race of the Short-eared Owl is shown by the former existence on the island of such a form. In his 'Birds of Eastern North America' (1881), Mr. C. J. Maynard says (p. 264): "I had an excellent opportunity of studying the habits of these Owls when camping . . . on the island of Muskeget during the early part of July, 1870. . . . During the first few hours of our visit, we discovered two or three huge nests placed in the tops of this dwarfed shrubbery [beach plum bushes], but could not, at first, make out to what birds they belonged. The island was swarming with three species of Terns, and, after a time, we saw a cloud of these birds gathering around some object which was suspended in air, but the Terns were so numerous that we could not see what it was engaged their attention until it moved onward, when we saw that it was a Short-eared Owl. We afterwards found that there was quite a colony of them on the place; in fact, we secured four or five specimens." On page 263, Mr. Maynard says that these specimens are so bleached as to appear nearly white in the distance. Of course, at so early a period in the summer, this bleaching could hardly have been due to a mechanically abraded condition of the plumage, and indeed Mr. Maynard has personally assured me that such was not the case, but that the birds represented a pale, resident race. This race has long since been exterminated. During my three visits to Muskeget in 1892 and 1893, I searched carefully, but unsuccessfully, for the birds, and am confident that I should have found them were they then on the island.

While the Owls unquestionably destroy many Terns, the latter are now so well re-established on Muskeget that a colony of the former would be no more a menace to their welfare than it was thirty years ago; and by helping to offer direct historical proof of the rapidity at which modification may progress under natural conditions, the Terns would be fulfilling a more important end than in gladdening the eye of the visitor to Muskeget, and the heart of the reader of Mr. Mackay's progress report.

Muskeget is probably only one among hundreds of natural biological laboratories. Ornithologists can do valuable work in preserving the natural conditions in such places; but a great danger is that, under the influence of æsthetic and sentimental considerations, bird protection will become so one-sided as to lose its scientific value.

Very truly yours,

GERRIT S. MILLER, JR.

*Peterboro, New York.*